Ethnomethodology

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Abstract

This chapter explores the influence of Harold Garfinkel and the approach to studying social action known as ethnomethodology. The chapter explores the distinct approach to studying organizing 'as it happens' developed by ethnomethodologists. We identify the differences between ethnomethodological approaches and mainstream structural-functionalist sociology and also identify the methodological concerns and requirements this approach brings with it. We conclude by identifying fruitful lines of enquiry for future research in management and organizational settings.

Keywords: Garfinkel, ethnomethodology, reflexivity, indexicality, documentary method of interpretation.

Chapter objectives

The chapter discusses:

- The emergence of ethnomethodology as a distinct paradigm of sociological inquiry.
- The relationship between ethnomethodology and mainstream structural-functionalist sociology.
- Some key concepts in ethnomethodology, including reflexivity, indexicality and the documentary method of interpretation.
- The approach to studying organizing 'as it happens' that is adopted by ethnomethodologists.

- An illustration of the ethnomethodological approach to studying organizations by Lawrence Wieder.
- Reflections on the methodological concerns and requirements of an ethnomethodological approach to organization studies.
- Directions of future research in business, management and organizational settings.

Introduction

What is ethnomethodology? The term ethnomethodology can easily be misunderstood because it sounds like it might refer to a type of research methodology. Despite its name, ethnomethodology is not a methodology for doing research – although it does have implications for the methodology used and requires observation (and ideally if possible and practical some kind of recording) of naturally occurring social settings, for reasons we will go on to explain. 'Ethno' means 'people', 'race' or 'culture' and 'methodology' refers to the set of *methods* or *procedures* that competent members of the social group in question use to go about organizing themselves by producing a shared social reality that is factual and objective to them. Put simply, then, ethnomethodology is the study of the *practical methods through which members of a particular social group accomplish social organization*.

Ethnomethodology is a distinct paradigm of enquiry in social science because it does not seek to provide the kind of second-order social scientific theory of how social order is generated provided by other theories. These theories typically attempt to identify the cause-and-effect relationships (or other kinds of dependencies) between different social variables (Button, 1991). Ethnomethodology does not view the academic sociologist as having a 'superior' (i.e. more sophisticated or complete) way of understanding and explaining the social world and hence, on this basis, seek to supplement or enhance member's own understandings and explanations with their own academic theories. "Ethnomethodology doesn't fit in with other people's conception of sociology. It was never meant to." (Sharrock, 1989: 661) For Garfinkel (2002), "the worldwide social science movement" uses formal-analytic sociological methods in order to study society thereby ignoring "the enacted, unmediated, directly and immediately witnessable details of immortal ordinary society" (p.97). Ethnomethodology recognises that the people they study are themselves sociologists. They are 'folk' sociologists (Wieder, 1974) or 'practical' sociologists (Benson & Hughes, 1983) who use their own common-sense

knowledge of the social realm to constitute the social world through their interactions. For ethnomethodology, the work of the sociologist is not *inherently* different from the work of the member living their life in the everyday (Zimmerman & Pollner, 1970).

Ethnomethodologists are interested in explicating the methods used by these 'practical sociologists' they study because it is their social knowledge and reasoning that *constitutes* the social reality used in real-world settings and is therefore *consequential* for what happens within them (Garfinkel, 1967). For example, if we want to understand how and why particular decisions get made in the criminal justice system, which have very real material consequences for those involved (who gets arrested and charged for a crime, or who gets sentenced or acquitted in court), we would first need to understand the forms of sensemaking and reasoning used in these settings to make these decisions. Early ethnomethodological studies of policing and judicial settings have done precisely this (Sudnow, 1965; Garfinkel, 1967: Chapter 4; Cicourel, 1968; Meehan, 1986; Pollner, 1987: Chapter 2). The point of an ethnomethodological study is not for the analyst to decide which version of social reality is 'real' and 'true' – something often referred to as 'ethnomethodological indifference' (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2002: 170). For example, if studying a courtroom and seeing the two different versions of reality put forward by the prosecution and defence, the aim would not be to decide which is 'correct' or evaluate whether the judge or jury got their decision 'right'. Rather, the point is to identify *how* (i.e. through what *methods*) a group of people (in this case judges and juries) produce what they take to be social reality (Travers & Manzo, 2016; Winiecki, 2008; Dingwall, 2000).

In this chapter we will first discuss ethnomethodology's approach to the study of social order. This is followed by a discussion of some core concepts in ethnomethodology, including indexicality, reflexivity and the documentary method of interpretation. We then discuss the implications of adopting an ethnomethodological approach to the study of management and organization for the kinds of research methods that can (and should) be used. We go on to give an illustration of how an ethnomethodological approach studies organization by discussing Lawrence Wieder's study of the 'convict code' in a halfway house for the rehabilitation of prisoners on release. Finally, we conclude by outlining some potential avenues for future studies in the management and organization field.

Harold Garfinkel

Harold Garfinkel was born on 29th of October 1917 in Newark, New Jersey. His father, Abraham Garfinkel was a furniture dealer and a member of the large Jewish community in Newark. In 1935, during the Great Depression, Harold studied business and accounting at the University of Newark and worked in his father's furniture business in the evenings (vom Lehn, 2014). According to Garfinkel, his study of accounting practices was more influential on his work on everyday accounts than the theories of L Wittgenstein, C W Mills and K Burke, some of his contemporaries (Rawls, 2002). Garfinkel went on to study an MA in Sociology at the University of North Carolina in 1942. His dissertation examined the methods through which inter-racial and intra-racial homicides were managed by the court system (Llewellyn, 2014). Garfinkel's war service for the US Air Force saw him assigned to an army hospital and training soldiers in Miami Beach for combat duties, amongst other things training the troops to fight tanks with small arms fire (Llewellyn, 2014; vom Lehn, 2014). After the war he studied under Talcott Parsons and completed his PhD in 1952 at Harvard. With the help of Philip Selznick, Garfinkel got his Assistant Professorship at UCLA in 1954. In 1967, Garfinkel published the now-classic book *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, which let to contentious, sometimes hostile commentary and debate. Garfinkel spent the rest of his academic career at UCLA until his retirement in 1987. He died on 21st April 2011.

Ethnomethodology and the study of social order

Garfinkel was certainly one of the most original – and controversial – thinkers in sociology. The publication of his book in 1967, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, divided academic opinion (Llewellyn, 2014). Ethnomethodology emerged as a critique of the structural functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons (Parsons, 1937; 1951) – under whom Garfinkel studied at Harvard University in the 1940s. Functionalism was first popularised by Emile Durkheim (1964 [1895]; 2008 [1912]) and sought to identify the social structures, variables and forces that are understood within the functionalist theory to create social order. The term 'social order' refers to any kind of cooperative, predictable and stable set of social relations that exhibit some kind of orderliness (Parsons, 1937). It could refer to the division of roles within a whole society or the more local orderliness of a line of people forming a queue (Sharrock, 1995: 4). Structural-functionalists see shared values as a kind of 'glue' that binds society together (Parsons, 1937, 1951). It is thought to ensure that people cooperate with each other because they have shared goals, roles, expectations and norms that can guide their behaviour, thereby generating social solidarity and helping to avoid social conflict. The internalisation of common values, according

to structural-functionalism, explains everything from the 'macro' social order of a class structure to the 'micro' social order of people forming an orderly queue to buy goods in a shop. Indeed, Durkheimian (1964 [1895]) functionalism had started with the idea that these shared values, norms and rules are pre-existing "social facts" – they exist 'out there' in the social realm and have a constraining power over people's behaviour.

Ethnomethodology attempts to rethink the fundamental premise of functionalist and structural-functionalist sociology that was at the time, and still is, the mainstream explanation of social order. Ethnomethodology instead takes these supposedly external 'constraints' and instead treats them as endogenous accomplishments of knowledgeable members of a social group (Leiter, 1980; Handel, 1982; Button, 1991; Coulon, 1995; Francis & Hester, 2004; ten Have, 2004). In other words, what structural-functionalist sociologists take as pre-given external social 'facts' and 'forces' that make members of a social group 'orderly' and 'organized', ethnomethodology takes as things that people have to *produce* in an ongoing social process. Ethnomethodology is the term that the field's founding thinker Harold Garfinkel used to describe the study of "the work of fact production *in flight*" (Garfinkel, 1967: 79, emphasis added).

From its inception, ethnomethodology was never a unified field (Maynard and Clayman, 1991). Even today it is best described as a splintered set of related sub-fields (Button, 1991). One of the most significant relationships is that between ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA), the latter field emerging from the work of Harvey Sacks. Some people use the term EM/CA to highlight this link (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010). Technically, ethnomethodology is not a 'social theory' in the traditional sense of the term because it also rejects the traditional ways of 'theorizing' about matters of social order and organization in mainstream social science (vom Lehn, 2016: 52). Rather than being regarded as a 'social theory' it is often regarded as a distinct *paradigm* of sociological inquiry in its own right. It is distinct because it seeks to 're-specify' the issues, topics and concepts of mainstream social science (Button, 1991).

Ethnomethodology 're-specifies' conventional sociological topics because it turns these (presumed to be) already existing, stable and external 'social facts' into a topic of enquiry in their own right. It asks *how* do people produce those so-called 'facts' through their practical actions, reasoning and inferences as they interact with each other. Sharrock and Anderson

(1986) think that re-specification is one of the reasons why ethnomethodology was often received in hostile ways and marginalised by the mainstream community of sociologists because it enquires into the very thing that they treat as their foundation. In other words, ethnomethodology 'pulls the rug from under the feet' of functionalism by questioning the fact-like status of what they treated as the starting point of their analysis. Rather than presume that social facts exist 'out there' in the abstract realm we call 'society' (Durkheim, 1964 [1895]), ethnomethodology turns this into an empirical question and matter of enquiry and asks: how do these social facts get produced in each situation?

Core concepts in ethnomethodology: Indexicality, reflexivity and the documentary method of interpretation

Like other approaches, ethnomethodology comes with its own conceptual vocabulary to describe how it views the social world. We will now explain some of the most important and well-used terms. The term *indexicality* originates in linguistics and, within linguistics, it is used to refer to certain words which mean different things depending on the context that they 'index' (think of how an index in the back of a book 'points to' a page location) (Bar-Hillel, 1954). The word "they", for instance, derives its sense from particular group that is being 'indexed' or 'pointed to' in that particular context. Ethnomethodology extends this by proposing that *any social action* – not just certain words but any utterance, any gesture, or indeed any kind of socially recognisable action – only 'makes sense' through inferences about what the action 'indexes' or 'points to' in that particular context. Seeing someone contract one eyelid is a simple example: it can be taken to 'index' a (not socially meaningful) physical act of clearing one's eye of debris or, when done in a particular way by a particular person in a particular context, can be interpreted as 'indexing' a (more socially meaningful) 'wink' that serves to indicate that what is going on is a wind-up, or signal some in-joke, or a make a flirtatious pass, and so on (Ryle, 1990; Geertz, 1973/2000). Whilst mainstream sociologists "have difficulty in understanding that order can arise from indexicality" (vom Lehn, 2016: 97), EM showed that *order only arises from indexicality*. Unlike for social theorists, for members of society, order cannot exist in the abstract.

The *documentary method of interpretation* refers to the circular process through which every 'appearance' of social action that we encounter is interpreted as 'documenting', 'indexing' or 'pointing to' an underlying pattern or 'typification'. The term typification is taken from the

phenomenology of Schutz (1953). If we fail to supply a pattern that connects what we are seeing and hearing right now to the 'typical' social scene (i.e. what type of social actor we are interacting with, what their role might be, what their motives might be, and so on), the interaction will be impossible. Without this typification, we simply could not make sense of what they might be doing and how we should interact with them. Social order would break down. As Sharrock and Anderson (1986: 57) state, "being able to see what is really going on is an indispensable precondition of action, of being able to orient oneself within a social scene and to carry on its life". For example, we are routinely and unproblematically able to interpret "How are you?" as a simple greeting that needs to be responded to with something suitable like "Fine thanks, how are you?" rather than a genuine enquiry into the status of our health, relationships, career, finances and so on because we use our common sense knowledge of that utterance as 'documenting' or 'indexing' a typical greeting sequence (see Garfinkel, 1967: 44, see also Sacks, 1975).

We can think of the term *appearance* as referring to the "here and now" immediate scene you have just encountered (e.g. seeing the contraction of an eyelid or hearing someone say "how are you?") and the term *pattern* refers to how this appearance is connected to the "larger social scene" (Leiter, 1980: 171). The term 'social scene' refers to our sense of something that is an enduring, typical and recurring aspect of the social world (like a norm, rule, role, motive, social type, and so on). The term *reflexivity* refers to the practices of producing accounts that both describe and constitute a social scene for what it is. Sharrock and Anderson (1986) explain that reflexivity refers not to an academic virtue (e.g. being 'more reflexive' about how data were generated and the effect of the researcher on what was said) but rather describes a fundamental property of accountable action, namely that "the describing of social activities is part and parcel of the activities so described" (p. 57). If you answer in the affirmative to the question "was that a promise?" you not only describe your previous speech act, you hereby fully turned it into a promise and you acknowledged your accountability and created future accountability. "Just as the accountant is accountable for his work, the everyday actor is accountable for her/his action. Everyday actions are accounts and accountable just like the inputting of data by accountants; they are "observable-and-reportable" (Garfinkel 1967: 1) actions that actors are accountable for, because they are visible as the producers of the action." (vom Lehn, 2016: 18)

Because Garfinkel proposes that all talk and actions are indexical, that is, they depend on the context or setting for their meaning, it also means that this talk and action is what makes the

setting or context what it is. Both elaborate each other. In an example discussed by Garfinkel and Wieder (1992), the category of the 'abandoned car' is constituted by members (in this case traffic wardens) via a distinction with the category 'illegally parked car'. There is typically not one clear attribute that would distinguish one from the other; rather, once a car has been classified as ready to be towed away, it is then and thereby constituted as 'abandoned'. Members' methods have created the category of the abandoned car, a category that would not exist without these methods. "The descriptions of the social world [the accounts that we produce when we interact with each other] become, as soon as they have been uttered, constitutive parts of what they have described" (Coulon, 1995: 23). A traffic warden's description of 'abandoned' becomes part of the scene (the car subsequently gets towed away) in a way that is unlike an anthropologist's categorization of a tribe's practice as deviant will *remain an observer's category* and not become part of the scene.

Clegg (1975) gives a fascinating example of how a group of joiners on a building site he was studying invoked the 'inclemency rule'. The inclemency rule was written into their contracts and stated that joiners should not work in 'inclement weather'. There was no consistent definition of how bad the weather had to be before it was categorised as 'inclement'. The joiners invoked the inclement rule to down their tools and have a break whenever they determined that the weather was too bad to-continue working. Clegg showed how the common-sense use of rules played out within the management-labour power relations on the building site. Ethnomethodological studies therefore have a very different approach to studying the role of formal rules and regulations in organizational life. The formal written contract of these joiners was not 'pushing and pulling' these men into compliance with the rules written in them. Ethnomethodology therefore shows "the inadequacy of formal rules and official procedures for capturing the detailed work that is necessary to perform competently the tasks that each setting poses." (Maynard & Clayman, 1991: 405)

The appearance of stability and orderliness, in everyday life as well as formal organizations of various kinds, is therefore built from the continuous use of member's *common-sense knowledge* of what is happening and *common-sense reasoning* about what they should say or do next derived from their use of the documentary method of interpretation. Ethnomethodology seeks to identify what "stocks of knowledge" and "reasoning procedures" – or what Cicourel (1973: 52) alternatively calls "interpretive procedures" – exist that make social organization possible. It "does not ask 'under what conditions would a person be caused to act?' (which is the standard

question) but 'under what conditions does an action become recognisable and its cause (if any) identifiable?'" (Sharrock, 1989: 663) It therefore asks: what are these interpretive procedures and how do people use them to get things done? In so doing, ethnomethodological studies are able to show how social order requires constant, albeit largely imperceptible and predominantly unconscious, effort and activity. Rawls (2008: 701) refers to the "constant mutual orientation" to unfolding scenes of action as people seek, turn by turn and action by action, to make and display their sense of what is going on.

Research methods used in ethnomethodological studies

Doing an ethnomethodological study comes with some quite specific requirements for the types of research methods you should use, as well as particular procedures for data analysis. Ethnomethodological studies have a strong preference for the observation of *naturally-occurring settings* or, in Garfinkel's (1988) formulation, "locally produced naturally accountable" phenomena. What this means is that settings that are 'contrived', that is, set up purely for the purposes of generating data for the researcher (such as interviews, focus groups, experiments, questionnaire surveys) have little value because they do not give us the ability to recover the ethno-methods used to accomplish the organization of that setting we are interested in studying[1]. For example, if the setting in question was an organization you are studying, asking people about the organization in interviews or focus groups, setting up an experiment to replicate a situation that takes place in the organization, or designing a questionnaire survey to be distributed to people in the organization would all give you little insight relevant to the key ethnomethodological question: what are the ethno-methods through which members of that organization go about organizing themselves? To generate these insights, you would need to *observe* the members of the organization doing whatever job it is that they do: managing people, selling goods or services, coordinating logistics, collecting donations for charity, and so on. If you are able to get some kind of video or audio recording of the people doing their

[1] Many of Garfinkel's most (in)famous studies did in fact involved 'contrived' settings of various kinds. His (in)famous breaching experiments (Garfinkel, 1967: Chapter 2), where he asked his students to deliberately break or 'breach' the normal 'rules' of interaction, for example by asking people to clarify what they really mean or acting like a lodger in your own home where Garfinkel asked his students, were 'contrived' in this sense of not being naturally occurring. His infamous 'student counselling experiment', where students were told they were speaking to a counsellor who could only answer 'yes' or 'no' to questions they posed (which were in fact randomly generated), was also contrived in this sense of not being naturally occurring. However, they differ from other contrived researcher-designed settings informed by positivism, where conditions are controlled and variables are tested, because their aim was not to test the correlation of variables but rather to surface the kind of common-sense reasoning that is normally so taken-for-granted and therefore not visible for analysis.

work, this is even better. The use of recording technologies enables you to slow down the moment-by-moment unfolding of the interaction (including both turns at talk and non-verbal signals and movements) and subject it to repeated analysis by replaying the sequence and looking for the ethno-methods that people were using, often unconsciously and in the split-second reaction time of an interaction, to produce social order (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010).

When people see ethnomethodological studies of interviews, such as Zimmerman's (1969) analysis of interviews with welfare claimants or Llewellyn's (2010) study of job interviews, or ethnomethodological studies of the collection and analysis of statistics generated from surveys (see Gephart, 2006), the point we just made about using observation as the primary method can seem confusing and perhaps even contradictory. There is an important distinction to be made here. Ethnomethodological researchers are interested in *observing* how these research methods and instruments (the interview, the survey, the focus group, etc.) are generated and used by the people who perform them as part of their normal work. The researcher is not seeking *themselves* to interview or survey people *about* their work, thereby generating their own interview accounts and survey results. Rather, the researcher is trying to find out how people who use interviews and surveys – or any other research method for that matter – use those methods to produce social reality and generate social order in whatever setting they happen to work in. For example, this could include welfare claim assessors using interviews in course of their work in a welfare agency (Zimmerman, 1969), managers using interviews to recruit candidates for a job vacancy (Llewellyn, 2010), or policy officials using survey statistics to formulate policy recommendations (Cicourel, 1968).

If it is the researcher asking the questions and conducting an 'interview' – such as Garfinkel's (1967: Chapter 5) interviews with Agnes, the intersexed person seeking sex change surgery, or Wieder's (1974) informal questioning of the parolee's in the halfway house we will discuss in more detail below – this interview data is also treated in a distinct way. The interview accounts are not treated as giving access into *the reality*, such as the subjective thoughts, feelings, attitudes and values of the person being interviewed (Rapley, 2001). Rather, they are treated as opportunities to tease out the methods people use for answering questions and telling stories that construct their social reality, albeit to a researcher rather than as part of their normal working lives (ten Have, 2004: Ch 4). For example, an interview account could be analysed for what membership categories are used or how accounts of social reality are produced as

objective and factual (ten Have, 2004: 75), without assuming that those membership categories or accounts necessarily get produced in the same way in other settings (this would be an empirical question to be examined by studying the categories and accounts produced in those other settings). In this sense, interviews should be treated as accounts that can be collected by the researcher and added to other accounts collected as part of field research (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006).

Issues of sampling are also considered in a different way in ethnomethodological studies (ten Have, 2004). It does not matter whether the social group you are studying is large or small, formal or informal. It could be an entire profession, an occupational group, a firm or a small work team that is being studied. It does not matter whether you study all the people doing that work activity or just a handful of those people, depending on what access you managed to negotiate. The key thing is that the people in the social group share, recognise and employ similar 'methods' to do whatever they do together and that you have gathered a sufficient number of observations of their work practice to be able to identify what these common methods are. In Clegg's (1975) study of a Yorkshire building site, he simply spent enough time with enough workmen to be able to see and understand the 'pattern' through which the inclement weather rule was being invoked. Ethnomethodology is the study of social *practices*, not social *variables*, and issues of the demographic profile or roles or attitudes of the people you study simply do not enter the equation. If demographic categories enter the analysis (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, religious belief etc.), it is through the analysis of how they are invoked and made relevant within the interaction by the members themselves (see e.g. Llewellyn, 2011, 2011a). The point of an ethnomethodological analysis is to identify what shared social practices (ethno-methods) are being used to generate social order as the people interact, not what variables are making people behave the way they are behaving. As ten Have (2004: 75, emphasis in original) explains, "the interest is *not* in people as such, but in people as *members*, as competent practitioners, because ultimately ethnomethodology is interested in order-producing *practices*".

As a basic methodological requirement, then, an ethnomethodological study needs to use observation of the setting to identify how a particular sequence of interaction is accomplished by observing it *as it unfolds in real-time*. It would also ideally be informed by deep immersion in the field site(s) to enable "an embodied experience of the work in question" (Rawls, 2008: 711). Indeed, in carrying forth the ethnomethodological programme, "(r)esearchers have

ventured into a wide range of bureaucratic and occupational settings e.g. classrooms, courtrooms, medical clinics, police departments, public welfare agencies, and elsewhere-to produce findings that are institutionally sensitive. These studies explicate the processes through which participants perform." (Maynard & Clayman, 1991: 404)

Such deep immersion could mean *participant* observation and this could quite literally mean training to become competent in doing the work activity in question and then actually taking part in the activity with those you are studying (Lynch et al, 1983: 207). This *deep immersion* is particularly important in settings where the ethno-methods are more specialised and technical rather than "common knowledge". Ethnomethodologists sometimes refer to this as the 'unique adequacy requirement', in which the researcher must have "adequate" mastery of the setting under study "as a precondition for making ethnomethodological observations and descriptions" (Lynch, 1993: 274; see also Rawls, 2008; Rouncefield and Tolmie, 2012). However, some ethnomethodologists do not actively participate in the setting and just act as a 'fly on the wall', observing (and perhaps recording) the action as it unfolds. This works perfectly well if the researcher has a basic competence and "adequate" mastery of the setting already. For example, Llewellyn (2011, 2011a) did not need any special competence to study the selling of a charity magazine on the high street or people paying for admission to an art gallery.

As in Llewellyn's (2011, 2011a) study, it is also possible to collect observational data without being there as a researcher, just setting up a camera or recording device (or using one that is already there, such as the CCTV already present in the setting or audio recordings already made in the setting) without being physically present. There are, of course, important matters of research ethics to be considered with any observational study, regardless of whether the researcher is present and whether recording technology is used. These include how to ensure informed consent and how to ensure confidentiality for those observed, if such confidentiality is important for avoiding any harm to your participants. Signed consent and confidentiality forms are sometimes not possible or practical in every setting, so alternatives ways of protecting those you study would need to be designed, such as displaying a sign notifying people that a study is underway and giving them the right to withdraw from the study or receive further information if they are unsure about giving their consent (Llewellyn, 2011; 2011a), as well as giving details of how the data will be stored and used.

The way that data is analysed in an ethnomethodological study is also very different to the types of analysis found in other qualitative approaches, again indicating "the fact there is a great gulf [which] typically divides ethnomethodologists from other sociologists" (Sharrock, 1989: 660). The researcher does not try to 'code' the data (i.e. the observations or recordings of people at work) using some kind of software package that enables disparate bits of data (e.g. extracts from interview transcripts, fieldnotes of observations, survey responses, etc.) to be grouped together into a 'code', later to be grouped together again into higher-order codes as part of the abstraction of general themes or patterns from the data. Rather, the data must be *kept within its interactional context* and the patterns looked for are *patterns in the interactional organization* of the work the people are doing.

There are two main ways in which cases (i.e. extracts of sequences of interaction) can be drawn out for analysis (ten Have, 2004). The first is single case analysis. An extended sequence of talk and interaction, one which is particularly important for that setting or particularly rare and stands out as different or unusual in some way (e.g. an exception to the norm, an unusual occurrence that had to be treated differently to normal occurrences) is transcribed and subject to turn-by-turn analysis to identify how social order was produced. The discovery of the optical pulsar, for example, was a one-time event and therefore suitable for a single case analysis (Garfinkel, Lynch, & Livingston, 1981). The second is the creation of a 'collection' of cases. For example, the analyst could gather together a collection of instances of people answering recruitment questions in an interview, instances of managers making recruitment selection decisions, instances of people making judgements about the welfare benefits that claimants should receive or people making policy recommendations on the basis of survey statistics. The analyst would use this collection of cases to identify the shared inferential practices (ethno-methods) those people used to get their work done.

Re-specifying organizations: The case of the convict code

It would be useful to look in more detail at one particular study to show how an ethnomethodological perspective takes a somewhat distinct approach to conceptualising 'organizations' by re-specifying them as a product of members' interpretive procedures. Lawrence Wieder's (1974) study is particularly useful for a number of reasons. Not only has Wieder's study become renowned as a classic study in ethnomethodology and not only does his study involve a formal 'organization' (and hence is particularly relevant to students of

management and organization studies), Wieder also directly contrasted his ethnomethodological perspective with more conventional social theory explanations to illustrate the difference between them. His work has also gone on to influence more recent ethnographies of deviant groups (see e.g. Jimerson & Oware, 2006).

Lawrence Wieder's (1974) book *Language and Social Reality: The Case of Telling the Convict Code* tells the story of his fieldwork in a 'halfway house': a place where recently paroled prisoners – in his case narcotic offenders - were sent to live for 'rehabilitation' before being released into the community. Wieder spent many months conducting non-participant observation in the halfway house. He informally interviewed the staff and residents about their behaviours and decisions, observed meetings of the various programmes and activities, attended staff meetings, and generally hung around in the communal areas hoping to learn about life in the organization from the perspective of the residents and staff.

Wieder's halfway house was a formal 'organization' with all its attendant matters of business to be accomplished. There was an official organizational *goal* – in this case the goal was the rehabilitation of narcotic offenders before being released into the community. There were formal *rules and policies* to be followed, such rules about visitors, a night-time curfew, and an official schedule of therapy and employment skills training for rehabilitation purposes. There was also a clear *division of labour* and *distribution of roles* between staff, and between staff and residents. There were a range of *organizational decisions* to be made, such as where residents should be allowed to go and when they were permitted release. In other words, this was a type of organization that required managing and organizing just like any other organization, whether in commercial, public sector or third sector, with its formal rules and structures as well as its informal sense of 'how we do things around here'.

Before starting his study, Wieder was well aware of the existing sociological and anthropological work that had been done on the so-called "counter-cultures" that are presumed to govern communities of criminals and other such deviant groups. Existing social theory explanations of deviant behaviour held that there exists a "moral code" that deviants followed, with "rules" or "maxims" such as:

- Do not 'snitch' (i.e. inform on the deviant behaviour of other convicts)

- Do not ‘cop out’ (i.e. admit you have done something illegal)
- Show your loyalty to other convicts (e.g. by providing alibis or cover stories or sharing your drugs)
- Do not trust officials (e.g. police, prison guards, social workers, etc.)
- Do not be a ‘kiss ass’ (i.e. act friendly towards officials, participate in their rehab programs)
- Do not be a ‘sniveler’ (i.e. complain to officials for better treatment)

The traditional social theory explanation for convict behaviour goes as follows: these “rules” or “maxims” of the convict code are deeply-held norms and values that convicts have internalised through their socialization into the counter-culture and can therefore *explain* why convicts behave the way they do and *predict* how they will behave in a given situation. This traditional type of analysis is based on the idea popularised by the structural functionalist sociology of Parsons (1937, 1951) that rules, norms and values are external ‘social facts’ which are understood to ‘push’ and ‘pull’ people to behave in particular ways and thereby create the social order that we see in front of us: a structured world of consistent patterns of behaviour that gives society and social groups their ‘structured’ form. The structural-functionalist explanation proposes that social order is generated by the ‘rules’, ‘norms’ and ‘values’ purported to emanate from institutions such as the State, the education system or religion – or in the case of counter-cultures reactions against them - which create a structured and ordered society.

Wieder’s ethnomethodological analysis of the convict code can be contrasted with this traditional structural-functionalist analysis. Wieder was interested in the *methods* through which the convict code came to be experienced as external and constraining ‘facts’. The code was not just something that convicts and other deviants talked about in interviews or reported in questionnaire surveys. The code was also something used by the residents and staff to interpret and explain their behaviour – both to themselves and to others. Wieder turned the analytic lens on himself and studied how he pieced together the various observations and interactions he experienced in the first days and weeks of his study, in order to assemble the idea of this ‘convict code’. Using the notion of the convict code he had started to learn about from conversations with staff and residents, Wieder used the documentary method of interpretation (described earlier in this chapter) to make sense of what he experienced as a

researcher – including what he saw (from his non-participant observations) and what people told him when he asked them questions (in his informal interviews).

For example, Wieder noticed that during the group therapy sessions, where chairs were assembled in a circle formation and asked to talk about their deviant behaviour and address its causes and propose solutions, residents would sit in an excessively slouched position (slouched so much that their necks would rest at the back of the chair), make little eye contact with the staff member, make side conversations and sometimes refuse to answer questions. Some didn't even attend, despite the sanctions in place for non-attendance. These 'appearances' he observed in group sessions, he placed together in a 'pattern' by employing one of the maxims of the convict code, namely, 'do not be a kiss ass'. This process was reflexive because:

> "the sense of the rules and the sense of the meaning of the patterns of behaviour are mutually elaborative. The code furnishes meaning for the behaviour, which, in turn, supplies the meaning of the code." (Leiter, 1980: 198).

This insight has profound consequences for how the researcher uses their 'data' to produce a sociological 'theory'. It fundamentally questions the assumptions made in most traditional theories about causation – such as the idea that social facts (such as rules, norms or values) "shape our action as individuals … Social facts … are external to individuals and have a reality of their own" (Giddens, 2009: 13; Durkheim, 1982 [1895]). In contrast, for ethnomethodology, social facts such as the 'convict code' (or indeed any other organizational 'variable' for that matter) are viewed as interpretive devices used by members rather than as causal agents: "To be a causal agent … the code must be capable of being defined and recognized independent of context" (Leiter, 1980). As Wieder showed, the convict code did not exist independent of its methodical use in context.

Staff members also used the convict code to make sense of events using the documentary method of interpretation. For example, when residents refused to give information about deviant behaviour of a fellow resident – such as breaking a curfew or being caught with drugs in their room – this 'appearance' was interpreted using the 'pattern' of the code by treating the refusal as motivated by the maxim "do not snitch". The staff therefore accepted this explanation and did not probe further, even though they probably could and should have done in order to investigate violations of the official rules. Wieder's analysis showed that the code was not only

used retrospectively, to make sense of things that had already happened. It was also used *prospectively* as well. One of the residents, Pablo, asked to be released early on the grounds that a fellow convict who was about to join the halfway house suspected that he was a 'snitch' and therefore his life was in danger (retribution for 'snitches' was typically violent). Residents who gave other reasons for requests for early release, such as claiming to be experiencing racial harassment or having secured employment a distance away, were not granted their request. But Pablo was. The code was used as a reasoning procedure to anticipate future events that had not even happened yet. Similarly, official policies, such as policies on curfews and compulsory attendance at therapeutic meetings, were never put into practice on the grounds that they would be simply 'unrealistic', because the normative constraints of the code anticipated that residents would not comply. No such resistance or lack of compliance actually occurred, but it was anticipated because of their knowledge of the normative constraints of the code. Deviance from official organizational policies and orders was rendered 'reasonable' through the *reasoning procedures* provided by the code. Wieder's study therefore neatly demonstrates the use of the 'informal organization' (i.e. the convict code) as a scheme of interpretation for making sense of why aspects of the 'formal organization' (i.e. official policies) should not be implemented. The study also illustrates the *consequential* nature of 'telling the code'. Material consequences arose from its use. Certain residents were released (such as Pablo), while others were not. Certain policies were implemented and others were abandoned as a result of the code being employed as a scheme of interpretation.

To sum up, Wieder concluded that this so-called "counter-culture" referred to by term 'convict code' was not a stable and external set of facts and forces that somehow *caused* the residents to behave in a particular way. It was not a 'property' or 'attribute' of the social group. Rather, the convict code was in fact a scheme of interpretation that enabled staff, residents and observers such as Wieder to "organize particular behaviours into coherent, classifiable types of behaviour" (Wieder, 1974: 166). What Wieder's study shows is that knowledge of the code enabled members to undertake the interpretive work of transforming each and every behaviour and utterance they encountered into the 'application of a rule', namely the rules of the convict code. The 'business' of this organization – namely rehabilitating narcotics offenders back into society after release from prison – was achieved (or at times abandoned) through this continuous sense-making process.

Mainstream sociologists "treat order as an aggregate result of individual action in a context of either structurally constrained or goal-oriented activity" (Rawls, 2008: 703). In contrast, Wieder showed that the norms and rules of the convict code did not *cause* members to comply, as if pushing and pulling them in particular directions. In the same way, the formal or informal 'rules' of business settings – such as organizational structure charts, job descriptions, strategy statements, codes of conduct, manuals, guidelines, and so on – do not determine what people do at work (Bittner, 1974). The code could not be used to explain or predict the behaviour of organizational members in the way a positivistic science might demand. Rather, the existence of this social order was created by the "methods of giving and receiving embedded instructions for seeing and describing a social order" (Wieder, 1974: 172). The 'rules', 'values' and 'norms' supposedly generating the orderly patterns of behaviour did not exist 'out there', they had to be continually produced by members using their stock of social knowledge in every situation they faced: they were "an endogenous concerted achievement" (Maynard & Clayman, 1991: 403). It is this sense of social order being an outcome of a *continuous process* of interpretation rather than existing as a set of 'variables' that gives ethnomethodology its affinity to other process theories of organization (see Langley & Tsoukas, 2017).

Conclusion

Ethnomethodology has a special place within management and organization studies because of its distinct position as an alternative paradigm of social science. It is unlike most other approaches to studying the social world and, as such, has a lot to contribute to the study of organizational settings of various kinds. We hope that the reader will take away inspiration from this chapter and consider adopting an ethnomethodological approach in their own research. It might be helpful to consider in the concluding sections of the chapter the different streams of research through which ethnomethodological studies can contribute to our understanding of different forms of organization. We will consider three streams: workplace studies, the study of market transactions and finally a small but important body of work on public inquiries and official sensemaking.

Since the publication of Garfinkel's (1986) edited collection *Ethnomethodological Studies of Work,* ethnomethodologists have began to study a range of work settings under the umbrella term 'Workplace Studies'. These studies have sought to reveal the methods that organizational members use to make coordinated action possible by interacting with each other and artefacts and machines of various kinds. Studies have examined the use of photocopiers (Suchman,

1987; Orr, 1996), the design of a new technology (Button and Sharrock, 1998), air traffic control rooms (Suchman, 1993), London Underground control rooms and train divers (Heath, Hindmarsh & Luff, 1999; Heath & Luff, 2000), and CCTV operators (Neyland, 2006). This work has also found practical applications, for example in informing the design of human-computer interfaces and information systems (Luff, Hindmarsh & Heath, 2000; Rouncefield and Tolmie, 2011).

Workplace studies have produced a number of insights into how documents, graphs, charts and spreadsheets enable organization that future studies could advance further. Existing work has studied how organizational members use figures in spreadsheets (Gephart, 1988; 2006; Hughes, 2011), order forms (Moore, Whalen & Hankinson Gathman, 2010), formal plans and strategies (Samra-Fredericks, 2010; Neyland & Whittle, 2017; Whittle et al., 2016), the kinds of mundane artefacts used in meetings (Boden, 1994; Hughes, et. al., 2010), and paper-based and digital records that are routinely used in workplaces (Watson, 2009; Heath and Luff, 1996; Hartswood et. al., 2011). Workplace studies have had much to offer in the study of management processes such as leadership and decision-making. This has included work on leader succession (Gephart, 1978), decision-making in multi-disciplinary teams (Housley, 2003), recruitment decisions (Llewellyn, 2010; Llewellyn & Spence, 2009; Bolander & Sandberg, 2013), and senior manager decision-making and leadership interactions (Samra-Fredericks, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005; Iszatt-White, 2010, 2011; Whittle et al., 2015; Mueller et al., 2013).

A second body of ethnomethodological work has studied market interactions where goods or services are being sold. Studies have examined interactions between salespeople and their customers (Clark & Pinch, 2010; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013), acts of charitable exchange (Llewellyn, 2011, 2011a) and auction houses (Heath & Luff, 2010). There is much more still to contribute in this area by management and organization researchers who are interested in how markets are created and enacted. One obvious future research opportunity is in the study of marketing professionals, whose day-to-day work has not been fully explored from an ethnomethodological perspective.

A final body of work where future ethnomethodological studies would have rich insights to contribute is in the study of societal sensemaking. The focus here for management and organization researchers is not on the organization itself but rather how organizations, and the people who manage them, are held to account for organizational actions (in particular disasters,

scandals and crises) through accounts produced about them and by them in different social institutions. Two streams of research are potential here: studies of how organizations and their actions are accounted for in media discourse (see e.g. Jalbert, 1999) and how they are accounted for in public enquiries or similar such hearings of official bodies of various kinds (see e.g. Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Pollner, 1987; Gephart, 1993; Lynch & Bogen, 1996; Goodwin, 1997; Whittle, Mueller & Carter, 2016). In doing these studies, ethnomethodology can contribute to management and organization studies in the same way that ethnomethodological studies have contributed to areas such as law, science and medicine (Maynard & Clayman, 1991: 408).

End of chapter exercises

1. What does the term 're-specify' mean for ethnomethodologists and how does it change the way that research is done by ethnomethodologists?
2. How do mainstream social theory explanations of deviant behaviour, which are based on the assumption that there exists a 'moral code' governing the behaviour of deviant groups, differ from the ethnomethodological approach used in Lawrence's Wieder's study?
3. How do ethnomethodologists question the status of 'social facts' (such as norms, values, rules, role structures, etc.) as variables with causal properties that are amenable for use in positivistic social science reasoning about cause-and-effect?
4. Try out a little experiment to establish how people create a social 'fact' such as a queue. Next time you want to join a queue in a shop, see how far away you can stand behind the person at the back of the queue before the person wanting to join after you asks you "are you in the queue?" You can try other variations of this exercise, such as facing the opposite direction to everyone else, standing slightly to the side, or appearing to be still shopping. Use this experiment to identify the ethno-methods other people use to construct the social reality of 'a queue'.
5. Next time you have a conversation with someone (ideally a close friend or family member where this will not adversely affect your relationship!), try leaving an unusually long pause when it's your turn to talk. Then, after you have remained silent for a while, ask the person you are talking to how they made sense of the long pause. This will give you some understanding of the documentary method of interpretation they used to generate a meaningful 'pattern' or 'typification' to understand your strange behaviour.
6. Think of an example where you used the documentary method of interpretation to establish a completely different 'pattern' to someone else who was also present when you

made sense of an event (for example, a meeting you both attended). How did you create this different sense of social reality, using which 'pattern'? What 'pattern' did they use to create their sense of reality?

7. If you were to design an ethnomethodological study that involved interviews or questionnaire surveys, how would your research design differ from the more conventional social scientific research designs that employ these research methods?

Glossary of key terms

Accountable/accountability. In ethnomethodology, accounts produced by members of a social setting are not 'about' the setting but part of the constitution of the setting. Members of the setting work to make their scenes publicly and visibly accountable through the production of accounts that render them 'real'.

Documentary method of interpretation. The documentary method of interpretation is the interpretative activity through which a link is created between an event or 'appearance' and an underlying 'pattern' or assumed meaning structure in a circular fashion, wherein each elaborate the other.

Indexicality. The idea of indexical expressions is extended from its origins within linguistics and in ethnomethodology refers to the notion that the meaning of all utterances and social actions is dependent upon a context that is supplied to make sense of it. Context, from this perspective, is not a fixed set of properties of the social scene but something that is brought into being in the moment-by-moment unfolding of the interaction.

Reflexivity. The term reflexivity used in ethnomethodology does not refer to the forms of self-reflection undertaken by researchers when reflecting on their role in the construction of their data and findings. Rather, reflexivity refers to a property of social action, namely that members of a social setting understand their actions through reference to a context at the same time as that context is being defined through their actions.

Re-specification. Ethnomethodology 're-specifies' conventional sociological analysis by turning the 'social facts' presumed to exist 'out there' into a topic of empirical enquiry. It examines the methods that members use to create the things they take to be social facts and that give them their fact-like status in their moment-by-moment interactions.

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